

**CONTRASTIVE IDIOMATOLOGY.  
EQUIVALENCE AND TRANSLATABILITY OF  
ENGLISH AND SPANISH IDIOMS**

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The linguistic literature on idioms and fixed expressions is small in comparison with that on metaphor, rhetoric or grammar, and despite recent developments in the field of translation and contrastive linguistics, idiomatic expressions still pose a serious challenge for translators and foreign teachers. Nevertheless, there are some interesting studies on their nature and structure and the topic has attracted linguists for a long time.

The present paper proposes a review of the literature on idioms and fixed expressions across languages. It provides operational definitions of idioms and fixed expressions, investigates their types and context of occurrence, and discusses constraints they impose on the transfer process with special reference to Spanish and English. It then proposes strategies for translating different types of idioms from the source language (SL) into the target language (TL).

In order to achieve this goal, a contrastive analysis of idioms and fixed expressions needs to ask certain questions:

1. To what degree are the idioms of a given language truly idiosyncratic? In other words, could we talk about *language universals* when dealing with idioms?;
2. Is it possible to contrast languages on the basis of the preponderance of a given idiom type and in so doing establish that the preponderance of one such type results in a greater or lesser degree of semantic opacity?;
3. Does the presence of apparent idiom cognates across languages indicate the possibility of one-to-one transfer in translation?

It is these three questions on which this contrastive study of idiom concentrates.

Let us start with some definitions of idioms. Various definitions of "idiom" have been proposed in the linguistic literature, e.g. in Chafe (1968), Fraser (1970), Smith (1925), Hockett (1956, 1958), Makkai (1972), Weinrich (1968), Torrents

del Prats (1969), among others. We can also find some definitions in the preface of dictionaries of idioms; or in the literature of translation theory and practice, as in Vázquez Ayora (1977), Mounin (1982), Nida (1969), or Baker (1992), to name but a few.

What emerges from these discussions is a list of characteristics such as the following: an idiom is a complex expression (Weinrich 1969:26) or a grammatical form composed of more than one word (Makkai 1972:122); its meaning is not deducible from its structure (Hockett 1956:221, 1958:172) or the meaning of its components (Makkai 1972:122); its meaning is comparable to that of a single lexical item (Chafe 1968:111); the units of which the idiom is composed are polysemous and the meaning of the idiom derives from a "reciprocal contextual selection of subsenses" among them (Weinrich 1969:42); since the meaning of the idiom is not derivable from the meanings of its components, it is subject to possible lack of understanding or erroneous decoding on the part of an uninformed listener (Makkai 1972:122); an idiom may exhibit syntactic "ill-formedness" (Chafe 1968:112) and "transformational deficiencies" (Chafe 1968:11); idioms in their internal structure range from completely frozen constructions to constructions that allow varying degrees of reconstruction, extraction, permutation, insertion and adjunction, though they are never totally freely reconstitutable (Fraser 1970:22, 39-42); idioms are the manifestation of "a discourse", i.e. the "inner design" or "structure of thought" being communicated via a given language code (Roberts 1944:291); idioms are the most vital and luminous manifestation of the language, or, as Torrents del Prats (1969:1) writes:

"El modisimo es la alegría del idioma, el color o la sal, o como se le quiera llamar. Es la evasión inesperada de la monotonía narrativa, que nos hace más soportable la confidencia personal no solicitada o que nos pone inmediatamente en ambiente. Cuando decimos que "no está el horno para bollos", nos ahorramos el esfuerzo de matizar una situación que difícilmente podríamos expresar con la misma viveza que nos depara el modismo dentro de los límites de una ecuación lógica."

We can also find other working definitions in dictionaries, as in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia (RAE)*, that defines idioms as: "El modo particular propio o privativo de una lengua, que se suele apartar en algo de las reglas generales de la gramática."

In the dictionary by María Moliner (1979) we can read: "es la expresión pluriverbal de forma fija que se inserta en el lenguaje como una pieza única." And *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines "idiom" as: "the form of speech peculiar to a people or country", and "a form of expression, construction, phrase, etc. peculiar to a language."

Likewise, in the field of Translation Studies, scholars have paid attention to this area. In 1977 Vázquez Ayora (1977:304) called our attention to the consequences this linguistic phenomenon has for the translator, and the need of more specific dictionaries. He says:

(...) su marcada frecuencia ocasiona un problema constante en todos los niveles funcionales del lenguaje [...] La mayoría de ellas (expresiones idiomáticas) carecen de correspondencias exactas en la otra lengua. A esas dificultades se añade la carencia de diccionarios bilingües y monolingües de expresiones de esa naturaleza. Muchas de las que se dan en los diccionarios, hay que advertir, son (a) de distinto nivel de lengua; (b) con pérdidas semánticas; (c) francamente erróneas; y (d) de distinta frecuencia o arcaicas.

Since then, more emphasis has been put on dictionaries and a wider range of them, both bilingual and monolingual, are available. But idioms still constitute a problem for the translator and the teacher. Nida and Taber (1969:145f.) already mentioned these problems in the late sixties. They also made an interesting comment on the role of the translator that is still in use. They complained about the lack of sensibility of some translators who introduce or omit idioms when translating, and they talked about compensation as an effective resource to maintain the expressiveness of the source text.

Mona Baker (1992:65), from a more practical point of view, writes:

"The main problems that idiomatic and fixed expressions pose in translation relate to two main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly; and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys into the target language."

These remarks derive from the characteristics of idioms. Fernando and Flavell (1981:17) invoked the most regular ones. These are:

1. The meaning of an idiom is *not* the result of the compositional function of its constituents;
2. An idiom is a unit that either has a homonymous literal counterpart or at least individual constituents that are literal, though the expression as a whole would not be interpreted literally;
3. Idioms are transformationally deficient in one way or another;
4. Idioms constitute set expressions in a given language;
5. Idioms are institutionalised.

J.L. Vázquez Marruecos and Ramírez García (1986:265f.) add other common characteristics of idioms:

1. Spontaneity, that is, they appear in the text as something spontaneous, fresh...
2. Social character, that is, different social areas may have different idioms related to different semantic fields and to different social contexts and mass media;
3. Difficulties in using them properly, that is, to know when and how to use them;
4. Expressiveness that such phrases provide to the language when they are used properly.

All these properties go beyond the linguistic systems. This means that it is not only a question of whether an idiom with a similar meaning is available in the target language. Other factors, such as the way idioms may be manipulated in the source language, or the appropriateness or inappropriateness of using idiomatic language, or the context in which a given idiom is translated, must be considered.

Awwad (1990:57-67), as most researchers do, considers that two of the major areas of difficulty when translating idioms are misinterpreting the intention of the writer or speaker, and recognizing the cultural differences among languages with regard to both traditional and innovative idioms. In this case he points out that the translator may be at home with both cultures and both languages, as the failure to accomplish any of them may leave the translator at a complete loss to translate idioms that carry a heavy semantic load that is culture specific.

At this point conventions must be mentioned. They are part of the culture, and idioms tend to reflect some conventions which often have a metaphorical meaning. When this is not understood by the speakers, idioms may seem arbitrary in meaning. Then the translator, in order to produce a good translation, may even need to look for its origin as a strategy to convey it against logic. A very graphic example is given by Wescenlao Lozano (1992:141-156), when comparing French and Spanish. He says:

“Los castillos que nosotros hacemos en el aire, para los franceses tienen que estar hechos en España;...nos hacemos el sueco o nos despedimos a la francesa y en Francia se largan a la inglesa. Nosotros vemos moros en la costa cuando en Francia desembarcan los ingleses; hacemos el indio cuando los franceses hacen el zuavo, y ambos el mameluco.”

Every cultural community may also have idioms arranged into different semantic fields that in fact reflect different idiosyncrasies. For example, the traditional respect and love that English people feel for nature and animals is the origin of a series of expressions related to these environments in a higher rate than in Spanish. So we hear:

*As busy as a bee* (ocupado, hacendoso como una hormiga); *mad as a March hare* (alocado, más loco que una cabra); *like a cat on hot bricks* (nervioso, estar en ascuas, estar con el alma en vilo.)

History also plays an important role in the origin of idioms, and that is also different from country to country. There are different customs and traditions the knowledge of which may be useful for the translator in those cases when the meaning is not transparent and the translator looks for a close rendering of the idiom. That is the case of the English expression *to draw a red herring across the track*, which comes from the Middle Ages when the runways dragged herrings to prevent dogs from following their trail. Or in the case of *one might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb*, whose literal translation into Spanish is: *lo mismo da que lo ahorquen a uno por una oveja que por un cordero*, although a more idiomatic expression is available: *de perdidos al río*.

Literature is also a rich source for idioms in both languages with some correspondences as in: *to cry wolf* that has an equivalent in the Spanish expression *que viene el lobo*; or in the case of the English expression: *to bell the cat* translated as *ponerle el cascabel al gato*.

Popular knowledge (sabiduría popular) also provides good examples of fixed expressions, most of them under the form of sayings, some of which are literally ill-formed, losing their grammatical correctness and specificity, but gaining in expressivity and spontaneity. That is the case of *crack a joke* or the Spanish idiom *Estar con cien ojos*...

Vázquez Marruecos and Ramírez García (1986:629-634) conducted a research based on the idiosyncratic differences between English and Spanish. For them English culture is mainly based on practical and ethic grounds, while Spanish culture is mainly based on theoretical-aesthetical ones. Language, as a manifestation of culture, serves as a vehicle to show these differences. An example can be the different semantic fields to which idioms apply. According to the researchers, Spanish has a greater variety of idioms related to religious matters, e.g. *Estar en misa y repicando* (*To run with the hare and hunt with the hounds*); *No es santo de mi devoción* (*He/she's not my cup of tea*); *A santo de qué* (*for what reason*), while English prefers expressions connected with nature and animals, e.g. *Birds of a feather* (*De la misma calaña*); *There isn't room to swing a cat*; (*No cabe un alfiler*); *Give a dog a good name and hang him*, (*Cria buena fama y échate a dormir*).

Spanish also prefers expressions connected with the philosophy of life (theoretical aspect), e.g. *Caerse con todo el equipo* (*to cook one's goose*) or *Irse de la lengua* (*To let the cat out of the bag*), while English relates to the human body and clothes, e.g. *If tha cap fits, wear it* (*Si te pica te racas*); *to laugh up one's sleeve* (*Reirse uno para sus adentros*); *A bad hat* (*una mala persona*). When talking about customs and tradition, each linguistic community also refers to different semantic fields. Spanish prefers “la fiesta nacional” (bullfightings): *Estar al quite* (*To be ready to come to someone's aid*); *Ver los toros desde la barrera* (*To sit on the fence*); *Poner los cuernos* (*To cuckold*), while English prefers hunting: *To beat about the bush* (*Golpear sin ton ni son*); *To run with the hare and hunt with hounds* (*Estar en misa y repicando*), etc.

Obviously there are some coincidences in all fields and an equivalent idiom can be found: *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth* can be translated as: *A caballo regalado no le mires el diente*; *To take the bull by the horns* can be translated as: *coger al toro por los cuernos*; or *Die in one's boots* can be translated as *Morir con las botas puestas*. However, this does not mean that every time the translator finds it in a text he can use the equivalent idiom in the target text. Other factors such as context, frequency of use, style, etc., must be considered. But, again, I am not saying that translation can not be made, although it can be very useful for the translator to know that there exists some differences between both cultures in what can be called “cultural experiences.” At this point it must also be said, as Vázquez Marruecos and Ramírez García (1986:34) point out, that the intense growth of international relationship also affects the linguistic relationship, and as

a consequence of this, it can be observed that what is taking place is a: "creciente anglosajonización del mundo hispano y también una hispanización del mundo anglosajón," that is, an interrelationship that may make the translator's task easier.

The above remarks offer us an introduction to the question about to what degree the idioms of a given language are truly idiosyncratic. That they are "specifically characteristic" and "peculiar" to a language is a common statement among those scholars working on the comparison of idioms (Keniston 1929; Roberts 1944; Lado 1957; McElhanon 1975; Fernando and Flavell 1981). The question is in what way and to what degree they are peculiar to a language. In order to answer this question, first we must know what we mean by "peculiarity". Roberts (1944:300) defines "peculiarity" as follows: "The idiosyncrasy of permutation which a given language exhibits in contradistinction to all languages or a given period exhibits in contrast to all periods."

But these unique forms of permutation suggested by Roberts are hard to find in the world's languages. Usually certain idiosyncrasies of permutation are often shared by two or more languages as far as structural patterning goes. Thus several languages may share the combination verb + particle (adverb/preposition) that is peculiar to English in relation to Spanish or French, but not in relation to Chinese or Vietnamese, which have a verb class similar to the English phrasal verb. However, if we take English as a point of reference for establishing similarities and differences of structure that may be considered idiomatic in relation to Spanish, then the particular form (verb + adverb/preposition, e.g. *to fall in love*, *to ring up*) taken by the English phrasal verb, together with its frequency and role, appears to be a good manifestation of idiosyncratic permutation. In its translation into Spanish, a form of paraphrase is needed, and, in many cases, the opacity of the English expression disappears. The translator may also use other resources, but the particular constituent distribution in English phrasal verbs and their frequency and rhetorical function in general cause them to be considered unique when we are comparing English and Spanish.

On the other hand, there are other areas in which Spanish shows a greater use. For example, in the use of internal rhymes in parallel patternings. This syntactic and lexical parallelism appears in English proverbs too as in the case of: *waste not, want not* or *penny wise, pound foolish*; or in some examples of parallelism with internal rhyme, as in: *no gain without pains*, or in: *a friend in need is a friend indeed*, but it is not so common as in Spanish.

There have been periods in the history of Western literature that the use of parallelism as a rhetorical device was admired and cultivated, as in the case of the eighteenth-century English poetry (e.g. Alexander Pope's poems) when the language made a more extensive use of this device and more examples can be found, but neither in contemporary writing nor in ordinary conversation it is used at the same rate, a fact to be considered by the translator in order to provide other solutions considering the frequency of the pattern, its distribution and its rhetorical function.

Another question was formulated in the first pages of my paper: Is it possible to contrast languages on the basis of the preponderance of a given idiom type and,

in doing so, establish that the preponderance of one such type results in a greater or lesser degree of semantic opacity?

Following Fernando and Flavell's (1981:68f.) remarks, both English and Spanish show a high degree of semantic idiomaticity. This means that both languages have expressions:

"(...) which manifest a non-correlative syntax resulting in a non-literal signification and which possess, in addition, a homonymous counterpart having a literal signification resulting from a correlative syntax that manifests the highest degree of opacity in structural terms."

Some examples can be: *tighten one's belt* in English, or *estirar la pata* in Spanish. In some cases there is an equivalent in the other language, as is the case of the English idiom mentioned above and its Spanish counterpart: *apretarse el cinturón*. But this does not always happen, as in the case of the Spanish one. In this case English uses a different expression (*to kick the bucket*) that the translator must know.

Idioms may also have a double meaning, that is, a literal one, and a nonliteral (or idiomatic) one, or, in other words, they can have homonymous counterparts in which case they are liable to variant interpretations or even misinterpretations. English is a language that has exploited its homonymic potential to a very high degree, as is evident in the number of pure idioms of the type *to talk through one's hat*, or *to get in Dutch with somebody*, present in its lexis. Spanish also has a reasonably high number of this type of idioms (e.g. *tomar el pelo*, *sacar de quicio*, *bajarse los pantalones*), although the fact that it doesn't have verb + adverb/prepositional idioms results in a different degree of overall semantic opacity, being the Spanish ones easier to understand through the study of its origin and history, without an added structural peculiarity.

Nevertheless even the knowledge of its origin does not necessarily remove semantic opacity because some structural and pragmatic features may interact. That is the case with puns and witty ambiguities used in newspaper headlines or in journalists' columns, as for example in: *MP accuses whips of 'bully-boy' tactics*, or in the case of: *Rare turtle wins by a sore head*.

There are also idioms and expressions in both languages that show a violation of truth conditions (*rain cats and dogs*, *llover a cántaros*) or situational probability (*sit on a time-bomb*, *ser una bomba de relojería*) or syntactic irregularities (*to crack a joke*, *quitar la paciencia*) that make them easier to recognise and direct the reader and the translator to a non-literal interpretation.

As for the last question of the purpose of this paper about the possibility of one-to-one transfers when there exist apparent idiom cognates between languages, there seems to be agreement that an idiom does not translate "word for word." Even apparently simple translation equivalences may be treacherously deceptive. This may be a reason why, in language teaching, the realisation of the difficulties of translation led to the adoption of more contextually-oriented approaches.

Such a tendency is also observed in translation studies, and in the observations and recommendations given to translators, as we will see in the next paragraphs.

From what has been said we know that there are different types of correspondence between idioms in the source language (SL) and the target language (TL). Awwad (1990:59) establishes the following categories:

1. Expressions and functions correspond in both languages;
2. Functions correspond in both languages but expressions are completely different;
3. Functions correspond but expressions differ slightly;
4. Both expressions and functions differ and are language specific.

Gläser (1984, 1986) also points out four degrees of equivalence between idioms in SL and TL:

1. Total equivalence
2. Partial equivalence
3. Non-equivalence
4. Apparent equivalence ("false friends").

And Baker (1922:68-71), talking about the main difficulties involved in translating idioms and fixed expressions, summarize the following categories:

1. An idiom or fixed expression may have no equivalent in the target language, e.g., in some culture-specific expressions.
2. An idiom or fixed expression may have a similar counterpart in the target language, but its context of use may be different.
3. An idiom may be used in the ST in both its literal and idiomatic senses at the same time.
4. The very convention of using idioms in written discourse, the context in which they can be used, and their frequency of use may be different in the SL and in the TL.

From these comments we can infer that there is agreement in recognizing different types of relationship between the languages involved. This same agreement is given when talking about strategies.

I have mentioned before that, when translating, the way in which an idiom or an idiomatic expression can be rendered into another language depends on many factors. It is not only a question of whether an idiom with a similar meaning is available in the TL; other factors include the way in which the idiom constituents may be manipulated in the ST, or the appropriateness or inappropriateness of using idioms in a given register in the TL, as well as the content and receptor of the TT. The solutions available to the translator are also different. He/she can use an idiom of similar meaning and form, that is, "a good match", as Fernando y Flavell (1981:83) call it. In practice, however, it is very difficult to make appropriate decisions of this kind as "what is needed is a high syntactic, lexical and semantic correlation which depends in more cases on the stringency of the criteria applied."

And the tendency showed by some translators for this kind of match have produced meaningless translations that evince their lack of sensibility and/or of command of both languages.

The translator may then look for an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form, that is, functions correspond in both languages but expressions are completely different, as, for example, in *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* (Townsend 1982:11), when we read: *I felt rotten today*, translated as *Hoy me encuentro fatal*; or in the case of *Perdition seize the naughty fowl* (Wilde, O. *The Canterville Ghost*) translated as: *que el diablo se lleve a ese condenado volátil!*.

The translator may find idioms of similar structure and/or lexical constituents ("false friend"), but these superficial similarities do not obligatorily entail the same correlation of sense and he/she needs to paraphrase. For example in the translation of *Mrs Otis caught sight of a dull red stain* (Wilde, O. *The Canterville Ghost*) rendered into Spanish by the translator as: *la mirada de mistress Otis cayó sobre una mancha de color rojo oscuro*.

This strategy is, in Baker's words (1992:74): "the most common way of translating idioms when a match cannot be found in the language or when it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the TL because of differences in stylistic preferences of the source and target language."

Fernando and Flavell (1981:82) also consider paraphrase the best way to translate an idiom where no appropriate match is possible, instead of the forced effort to translate an idiom by an idiom, strategy that has led to many bad translations, graceless or downright misleading, as for example in the translation of: *Had a 'get well' card* (Townsend, S. *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*, 1982:140) translated as: *Recibí una tarjeta "que te mejores."*

Translation by omission can be another strategy to be considered by the translator when there is no close match in the TL, its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons. Closely related to it is the strategy of compensation, usually given in long texts, by which one may either omit or play down idiomaticity at the point where it occurs in the ST and introduce it elsewhere in the TT.

In conclusion, idioms are present in any language. They may then be considered a universal category. However, linguistic and philosophical aspects, as well as geographic and historic, political and economical, artistic and literary aspects have played an important role in the way both languages English and Spanish differ, and these aspects are reflected in the language, and through it, in idiomatic expressions. What I have tried to show in this brief contrastive survey is that both languages share some similarities, but they also show some dissimilarities in certain structural processes, rhetorical functions and connotations that make the translator's task more difficult. The examples provided from translations reinforce the idea that the translator, more than in other cases, must be bicultural, not bilingual, in order to understand and translate properly the heavy semantic load that is culture specific in some idioms.

Idiomatic expressions cannot be systematic, and the solutions to the translators cannot be systematic, either. However, specific knowledge of their nature, structure

and use in both languages may be useful, and that can be reached through a contrastive analysis of idiomatic expressions of the languages involved and the solutions taken in translation.

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